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ABSTRACT

Nukespeak--euphemisms or jargon that serve to hide the horrific nature of nuclear weapons systems and nuclear war--uses the strategies of domestication and bureaucratization to represent itself to the public. Domestication employs everyday language to introduce nuclear concepts into public discourse in a non-threatening manner, as when President Reagan named the MX missile "The Peacekeeper." Bureaucratization insulates nuclear concepts from public inspection by using acronyms or sanitized jargon, such as the military definition of the neutron bomb as a "radiation enhancement warhead." If some aspect of nuclear war cannot be conveyed persuasively with friendly metaphors, then the next best option is to use technical terms or acronyms that only "experts" can really understand. Nukespeak, as a thoroughly rhetorical enterprise, warrants attention because of its role in shaping consciousness of speakers and hearers alike. Kenneth Burke has argued that terminologies direct attention by selecting some aspects of reality to focus on while deflecting others. The likely consequence of nukespeak is that its users will tend to understand nuclear weapons, strategy, and war as benign or beneficial rather than repulsive or horrifying, while its receivers (the public) will tend to accept a reality defined by "official others." The challenge for the rhetorical critic is to identify the "Third Persona" of texts--the audience excluded by the discourse of nukespeak. (References are appended.) (NKA)

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Edward Schiappa

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THE RHETORIC OF NUKESPEAK
(1987 Draft)

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Nukespeak has been defined as the "language of the nuclear mindset" which encodes and reinforces the beliefs and assumptions of "nuclearism" (Hilgartner, et. al. xiii). Nukespeak has been described less technically as a language "consisting primarily of euphemisms, jargon, and bizarre acronyms which serve to cloud the true nature of nuclear weapon systems, nuclear fighting concepts, and nuclear war itself" (Totten 43).

Two identifiable nukespeak strategies are domestication and bureaucratization. Domestication is a strategy by which nuclear concepts are introduced into public discourse in a non-threatening manner: "we domesticate these weapons in our language and attitudes. Rather than feel their malignant actuality, we render them benign" (Lifton and Falk 106). Bureaucratization is a strategy by which nuclear concepts are insulated from public inspection by acronyms or sanitized jargon. This essay explicates each strategy, offers relevant examples, and proposes that the primary critical implication of nukespeak is that it further erodes the public sphere of argumentation.

Domestication

Domestication refers to the use of everyday language to describe the extraordinary in ordinary terms. Specifically, domestication is the use of "friendly" metaphors drawn from ordinary language to name otherwise objectionable nuclear weapons, strategy, and war.

Language is never a neutral vehicle of thought; to name a phenomenon is to suggest a set of attitudes and behaviors appropriate to the phenomenon. In Hugh Duncan's words, names are "goads to action" (21). As Richard Weaver put it, "language is sermonic" because "as long as man is a creature responding to purpose, his linguistic expression will be a carrier of tendency"(1971, 177). For Weaver, even single words have

"potencies" and possess this sermonic dimension because "single names set up expectancies of propositional embodiement" (1953, 211).

The suggestive power of naming is magnified when it involves the use of metaphor. Much has been written regarding the significance of metaphor in shaping a community of language-users' understanding of reality (see, for example, Burke 1954, Ricoeur, Sapir and Crocker). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca claim the use of metaphor is argumentative when the speaker seeks adherence to a particular perspective of reality (167-71). To the extent that metaphor "brings out the thisness of a that," as Kenneth Burke said, the "character" of a "that" is largely determined by the "this" being used to describe it (1945, 503). A "point of view" or particular "bias," then, is unavoidable when a phenomenon is named via metaphor.

The most persuasive metaphors are those drawn form ordinary discourse. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca observed, "the relationship between ordinary language and admitted ideas is not fortuitous: ordinary language is by itself the manifestation of agreements of a community of thought, by the same right as the received ideas" (153). Accordingly, the use of ordinary language helps to promote agreement between a speaker and audience.

Richard B. Gregg's work provides an explanation of the persuasiveness of metaphors drawn from ordinary language based on recent research in neurophysiology. Since similar stimuli will activate similar "neural patterns," the oft repeated experience of ordinary language leads to a high degree of "fixity" or stability to the "meaning" ordinary language evokes (87). Ordinary language embodies the common sense of a community of language-users, which includes the judgments, attitudes and feelings associated with certain words. Metaphors drawn from ordinary language help shape the "meaning" of a

newly named phenomenon by eliciting relatively entrenched attitudes and feelings. Since domestication involves naming by metaphorically extending ordinary language, it is a very persuasive means with which to talk about nuclear phenomena.

Examples of domesticated nukespeak are plentiful. Domestication began at the birth of the nuclear age with the naming of the first atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "Little Boy" and "Fat Man." Nuclear weapons as a class are less threatening when referred to as "nukes." Some weapons are preferable to others if they are "super," "clean" or "smart." How could anyone fear something stored in a "silo"? Calling nuclear weapons "hardware" evokes "impressions of something familar, useful, and available in a neighborhood store" (Nash 26). And, of course, no nukespeak analysis would be complete without mentioning Reagan's attempt to name the MX missle "The Peacekeeper," which won him the National Council of Teachers of English "Doublespeak" award.

Glenn D. Hook has argued that the use of "metaphors of life" has obscured the deadly nature of nuclear weapons. The beginning of nuclear weapons development is called the "birth" of a new era which has a number of patriarchs: Robert Oppenheimer, father of the atomic bomb; Edward Teller, father of the hydrogen bomb; and others. The use of life-cycle metaphors is used to describe nuclear weapons from beginning to end: "As members of weapons families, nuclear weapons, like other members of the military, have a 'useful life': they 'enter service,' are kept on 'active service' for a number of years, then 'retired' so as to give way to a new 'generation' of weapons, produced after a technological 'gestation' period, to replace the 'ageing' weapons" (70).

Weapons are procured as the result of public policy decisions which are made more acceptable to the political public through domestication. Calling the vast accumulation of nuclear weapons part of an "arms race" implies that we are involved in a contest which can

be won if we are determined to be strong and fast enough. Additional nuclear weapons are seen as desirable when they give us a "wider" or "richer" "menu of options," strengthen our "nuclear umbrella," protect us against a "window of vulnerability," or provide us with a "bargaining chip."

Nuclear war itself is made more palatable when represented through domesticated nukespeak. Lifton and Falk suggested that the mass destruction of two superpowers can seem manageable and even mildly pleasant when dubbed a "nuclear exchange," a phrase they noted "sounds something like mutual gift-giving" (107). Fighting a nuclear war becomes a game when understood through such phrases as "competitive escalation" and "strategic superiority." "Victory is possible" when the winner loses only 20 million lives or so --an "acceptable outcome" (Gray and Payne).

Bureaucratization

Bureaucratization can be usefully viewed as the counterpart to domestication. If some aspect of nuclear weapons, nuclear strategy, or nuclear war cannot be conveyed persuasively through the the use of friendly metaphors, then the next best option is either to sanitize the concept so that it appears neutral and inoffensive, or to technologize the concept by applying technical terms or acronyms that only insiders or "experts" can "really" understand. In both cases the effect is to mystify --to render nuclear policy irrelevant or inaccessible to public investigation and deliberation. As Burke observed, mystification is equated with class distinctions (1969, 122). One consequence of nukespeak is that the nuclear policy making bureaucracy is granted a privileged status because the lower "class" (i.e., the general public) is disenfranchised from the decision making language. As documented by Farrell and Goodnight's excellent study of the discourse surrounding the

accident at Three Mile Island, "insulated terminology" and "sanitized language" work at cross-purposes with the need for public deliberation (296).

As with domestication, examples of bureaucratization are plentiful. Reagan's runner-up for the Doublespeak award was an Air Force Colonel who described the Titan 2 missle as a "very large, potentially disruptive re-entry system" (Tolten 44). Because it has been sanitized (though in a transparent effort), the longer description actually tells the audience less than the original domesticated title.

A more complicated instance of bureaucratization is that of the "neutron bomb." While the name "neutron bomb" does not immediately inform the citizenry of the weapon's special characteristics, "neutron" implies a difference from other weapons, and "bomb" suggests it kills. The bureaucratized version of "neutron bomb" is "radiation enhancement warhead." To the nuclearist the phrase is more revealing, but to the "uninitiated" the concept is now bureaucratized because the key word--enhancement--is equivocal and thus mystifying.[1]

Acronyms are particularly useful tools for the bureaucratization of nuclear concepts. The military establishment is infamous for its use of acronyms, hence one of the effects of extending the use of acronyms to nuclear weapons, strategy and war is to render such concepts part of the "normal" military order. The more significant effect, however, is the consequent disenfranchisement of the "laity" who do not know what the acronyms denote. The burden is on the hearer--the public--to understand what MIRV, MARV, ASW, ICBM, SLBM, LOW, LUA, EMP, PAL, MAD, NUT, SDI, NORAD, SALT, START, etc. actually mean. It is arguably the case that many people assume an ability to state what the acronym stands for is the equivalent of understanding the concept or strategy.

As in the case of domestication, nuclear war itself is made palatable through

bureaucratization. When the Federal Emergency Management Agency refers to a "nuclear or radiological emergency," it makes what could be the end of the world on par with less threatening disasters such as floods or tornadoes (Winter). Starting a nuclear war by launching missles or dropping bombs before your enemy has the chance to launch or drop theirs used to be called launching a "first strike," then a "pre-emptive strike," and most recently an "anticipatory retaliation." Aiming missles to incinerate millions of men, women, and children is called "demographic" or "countervalue" targeting. If one lives through a "protracted involvement" (a nuclear war) and is not part of the "collateral damage" (unintended death and destruction), then one "operates" in a "postattack environment" (like Hiroshima, August 6, 1945). In nukespeak, "survivability" usually refers to weapons, not people.

Questions and Objections

Two questions are obvious concerning the preceding analysis of nukespeak. First, is it appropriate to refer to nukespeak as a strategy? After all, a strategy implies intentionality and suggest that the users of nukespeak are deliberately trying to hoodwink the public. Second, is there an alternative to nukespeak? Is there a way in which to discuss nuclear issues with impartial language? The questions are related, for if there is no alternative to nukespeak then it would seem unfair to characterize its use as a "strategy" in any meaningful sense.

A presupposition shared by most contemporary rhetorical theorists is that language is inherently "partial." That is, since symbols are abstractive and selective, there is always an implied preference--a point of view--intrinsic to any symbolization. In Burke's well-known words, "something of the rhetorical motive comes to lurk in every 'meaning,' however purely 'scientific' its pretensions. Wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric.

And wherever there is 'meaning,' there is 'persuasion'" (1969, 172).

From a behavioral perspective, language use is rhetorical because language elicits attitudes and actions. Even when language is kept supposedly neutral or "objective" an attitude of detachment or action such as "passive observation" is induced (Campbell). As Weaver has argued, there is no such thing as "semantically purified" speech (1953, chapter one). Put crudely, one has the choice of whether to use language to damn something, praise it, or pseudo-neutrally describe it. In any case the choice of language is not neutral, it is strategic (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 149).

In the case of nukespeak, language is used to portray nuclear issues positively (domestication) or to neutralize nuclear issues (bureaucratization). Both strategies have behavioral and attitudinal implications quite different from a hypothetical negative nukespeak: language used to condemn or negatively portray nuclear weapons, strategy, and war. Nukespeak functions ideologically as a strategy <u>even if</u> its use is not "intentional." As Hook suggested, whether intentional or unintentional, overt or covert, "the nuclearization of language plays a political role--the structuring of reality in such a way to facilitate the integration of nuclear weapons into pre-existing thought patterns, and the acceptance of their existence and possible use" (69).

There is reason to believe, however, that the strategies of nukespeak often are employed deliberately. In the 1950 book <u>How to Survive an Atomic Bomb</u>, the author laments the fact that people have been scared by the words "radiation" and "radioactivity" and condemns the "loose talk" about the atomic bomb and the "rays" it makes (Gerstell 22). The public's fears concerning atomic war in the early 1950s is well known. It is hard to believe it was an accident that in 1953 the Atomic Energy Commission named measured amounts of radiation as "Sunshine Units" (Hilgartner, et. al. 219).

During the development and testing of the hydrogen bomb, President Eisenhower reportedly suggested to the Chairman of the A.E.C. in May of 1953 that "we leave 'thermonuclear' out of press releases and speeches. Also 'fusion' and hydrogen'." Eisenhower was reported to have said "keep them confused as to 'fission' and 'fusion'" (United States 151).

In Herman Kahn's 1965 book, On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios, he maintained that certain metaphors were more appropriate than others to describe the excalation of nuclear war. Kahn rejected the "strike" and "chicken" metaphors as "misleading" and recommended reference to the "rungs of the escalation ladder" as a "useful" metaphor (9-11, 37). In contrast to the image of a violent strike or the irrational and dangerous game of chicken, Kahn offers his own, domesticated vision of escalation:

> Another metaphor as useful as the escalation ladder would be that of an elevator stopping at various floors. We can think of a typical escalation situation between the United States and the Soviet Union in terms of a department store with seven floors, each offering a number of options of varying intensity but still appropriate to that floor, from which the decision-makers on one side or the other may choose (41).

Not all instances of nukespeak are as transparent as the foregoing examples, or as Reagan's attempt to dub the MX missle "The Peacekeeper." Nonetheless, nukespeak is clearly rhetorical both in theory and in practice, and hence warrants the attention of the rhetorical critic as an important linguistic strategy.

Implications for Senders

Nukespeak actively structures the consciousness of speakers as well as hearers. Consequently, nukespeak is a potentially dangerous "terministic screen" for those in

positions of policy making and in the military establishment. Burke argued that terminologies direct our attention by selecting some aspects of reality to focus on and deflecting others. Hence the range of what one is able to "see" and comprehend is limited by the available terminology, since all else is filtered out by one's terministic screen (1966, 44-7).

According to Burke's analysis, the likely consequence of nukespeak is that its users will tend to understand nuclear weapons, strategy, and war as benign or beneficial rather than repulsive and horrifying. This hypothesized result has been supported by reports of former members of the military establishment.

In James C. Thomson's analysis of the Vietnam war, he insisted that it is impossible to understand the decision-making process without reference to the role of language (275). From his own experience in the military establishment Thomson provided examples of what has been described here as bureaucratization and domestication. Thomson stated that use of such terms as "systematic pressure," "targets of opportunity" and "body count" bred a "bureaucratic" or "game-theory" detachment. Describing the intensity of a proposed bombing and strafing strategy, Thomson quotes an Assistant Secretary of State: "It seems to me that our orchestration should be mainly violins, but with periodic touches of brass" (274). Thomson concluded, not surprisingly, that such bureaucratic jargon led to "professional callousness" in the conduct of the Vietnam war.

Henry T. Nash, a former intelligence analyst for the Air Targets Division of the Air Force, provided a similar report in his essay " The Bureaucratization of Homicide." He recounted a variety of maxims, acronyms, and loaded terms which "helped to obscure the reality of what the work was all about--to distract attention from the homicidal reality and give a brighter hue to the ominous" (26). His examples once again match the twin

strategies of bureaucratization and domestication. Nash stated that the use of such phrases as "power vacuum" and "power equilibrium" had "the ring of respected and predictable laws of the physical sciences that had nothing to do with such things as war and annihilation" (26). Nash also provided a case study of the effects of domestication:

> I recall the time in the late 1950s when the term "baby H-bomb" was commonly used in referring to low yield, small tactical nuclear weapons suitable for use in limited wars. This image of the lovable "baby" bomb helped to make a typical question in war planning such as "should we deliver 10 or 15 baby nukes on the Irkutsk Party headquarters?" seem like an innocent inquiry (26).

Hook has identified three effects of nukespeak for senders. First, the language of nukespeak induces its users to identify with the perspective of the "executioner" rather than the "victim." By viewing nuclear reality from the "top down" rather than from the "bottom up," nukespeak users are able to psychologically distance themselves from the plight of nuclear war victims (67). Second, by domesticating the results of a nuclear attack through such "humanizing" metaphors as "crippling" and "disabling," nuclear war appears recoverable and limitable, and hence contributes to "the underestimation of the risks involved in starting a nuclear war" (71). Finally, sanitized jargon and metaphors based on trade, games and physics allows military planners to avoid the major moral considerations of nuclear war, since nukespeak "enables America's nuclear war planners to maintain a moral self-image, treat the extermination of millions as a 'job,' and obfuscate the value problem underlying the use of nuclear weapons" (72).

Conceived in the domesticated and bureaucratized languge of nukespeak, nuclear war becomes far more than "thinkable;" it becomes the banal by-product of a bureaucratic

entelchy. Nukespeak may be the ultimate "trained incapacity."

Implications for Receivers

Since most of this essay has been directed towards the rhetorical agenda of nukespeak, the consequences of nukespeak for public audiences can be summarized relatively briefly. Farrell and Goodnight have suggested that the status of deliberative rhetoric is constrained by "prevailing conceptions of the public" (299). Domestication of nuclear issues renders them accessible to the public, but in a trivial manner. There is no need to deliberate over that which is not a problem or threat. Bureaucratization of nuclear issues insulates them from public inspection and critical appraisal. The result of nukespeak in both cases is a further decline in the "public sphere" of argumentation (Goodnight). Nukespeak "covertly tends to quell citizen involvement and decision-making about the nuclear arms race" (Tolbert 44).

In Farrell and Goodnight's words, nukespeak is a form of communication that becomes "self-confirming" (299). Maxine Greene, in an essay advocating that peace education be critical of positivism and "technical talk and control," warned that "danger lies" in the public's acceptance of a reality defined by "official others" (130). In Greene's view, failure to critique self-confirming interpretations is disastrous: "the more people are drawn into technical talk and the belief that some Other has the right to define the world, the more likely a nuclear war will be" (134).

Conclusion

This essay is, at best, a preliminary analysis of the linguistic phenomenon of nukespeak. Two strategies have been identified, one which casts nuclear weapons, strategy, and war in a positive light (domestication) and one which sanitizes or technologizes nuclear concepts (bureaucratization). By inference a negative nukespeak

would consist of linguistic strategies to portray nuclear weapons and war as dangerous and immoral. As a thoroughly rhetorical enterprise, nukespeak demands further study because of its role in shaping the consciousness of speakers and hearers alike.

It would be inconsistent with the view of language advanced in this essay if I were to suggest or imply that the analysis presented is the result of "disinterested observation." As recent essays by Phillip Wander suggest, rhetorical criticism is ideological whether it wears its ideology on its sleeve or not (1983, 1984). History suggests that rhetoric flourishes as an art according to the status of the audience. The guiding ideological thrust of this essay is the liberal democratic principle that public deliberation is both necessary and desirable in the formulation of public policy. One task of the rhetorical critic is to maintain and promote live options for potential audiences that might otherwise disappear from view. In Wander's terms, the challenge for the rhetorial critic is to identify the "Third Persona" of texts--the audience "negated" (ignored or excluded) by discourse (1984). Nukespeak, as understood in this essay, requires ideological inspection primarily by its negation and exclusion of audiences. Nukespeak consists of symbols that are, in Goodnight's words, designed to keep us watching as opposed to inviting us to participate in the construction of a future (225n).

Rhetorical critics have had the opportunity to examine what went wrong in the discourse of such historical events as Three Mile Island and the Vietnam War. The first step toward "correcting" nukespeak is to recognize that rhetorical critics will not have a similar "second chance" should nukespeak's ultimate "event" end the possibility of rhetoric, and, with it, history itself.

Note

[1] An editorial cartoon by Jules Fieffer portrayed several generals trying to decide on the official terminology for the neutron bomb. The generals reject "intensified" and "aggravated" radiation as too menacing and revealing. The generals unanimously endorse "enhanced." Reprinted in Tollen, page 25.

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